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OPINION

Information: a status symbol

By David D. Newsom

THE Walker spy case has once again made this nation conscious of the vulnerability of its secrets. Both the executive and Congress today seek to tighten the management of classified information.

There should be no illusions about the difficulty of reducing the risk of compromise. The problems are operational and technical. Above all, they are human. Individuals become spies. But other individuals in a large bureaucracy, totally loyal in their intentions, resist restrictions on information flow, because access to sensitive data means power and status.

Undoubtedly too much information is classified and too many have access to sensitive documents. Determining the correct classification can be complicated. An innocuous message, for example, may, to make sense, include reference to a sensitive document. The innocuous message must be given the same classification as the original. The substance of a conversation may not be particularly sensitive, but the fact that the two persons involved met at all might be extremely so. When there is doubt, most officials will classify at the highest conceivable level of protection.

The copying machine has added major dimensions to the problem. The temptation to "make a copy to keep" or to avoid procedures for authorized reproductions of classified documents often means that more copies are made than may have been authorized. The chances of compromise are magnified. The person with malevolent intent has but to "borrow" a document for a few minutes to copy. A newspaper columnist once boasted to an official of the State Department that he had copies of every incoming message; whether true or not, the claim illustrates the normal vulnerability of the system.

It is theoretically possible to control both the classification and the copying machine. Anyone who has tried to limit access to sensitive information knows that the human factor is the toughest.

Whether in the military or in the higher echelons of civilian policy making, access to sensitive information for a substantial number of people is essential. One can suggest that only senior officers should be privy to information that might aid our adversaries. But those senior officers cannot operate alone. They need secretaries, messengers, code machine operators. In the military, technicians, watch officers, and supervisors must know the basic technology and procedures.

In the policymaking areas, expertise is necessary — in language, countries, cultural patterns. Such experts must understand the government's objectives if they are to make a useful contribution. Difficult choices must be made. In 1978, the Iranian experts in the Department of State were, by and large, kept out of the planning for the abortive hostage rescue mission because of the desire to keep to a minimum those with knowledge of the plan. In the same year, plans for the negotiations to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China were confined to a handful for the same reason. Such restrictions can be justified, but insights valuable to policy options may be lost as a result.

Yet the amount of sensitive material in circulation can increase, regardless of other demands, because of the prestige factor. The people who do not have the "special" material with its distinctive cover on their desks are "left out." They are not invited to the important meetings. They feel less trusted. They clearly do not know all that is going on.

Information is power in a bureaucracy or a military organization. Efforts to limit access to those with a clear "need to know" strike at individual sensitivities, ambitions, pride. The official who may be excluded by a subordinate security officer will appeal to a higher level. Security clearances become status symbols.

In this and any administration, efforts will continue to restrict the flow of sensitive data and access to it. In the last analysis, it will prove impossible, as it has always been, to reduce totally the availability of information to those who would give it or sell it to an adversary.

One can be sanguine and say it is remarkable that, given the openness of our society, the lack of surveillance, and the many who have access, there is only the occasional Walker case. The damage done by one such case, however, merits continuing efforts to buck operational temptations, the electronic age, and personal egos to reduce as much as possible the numbers who can be subject to pressures of ideology, money, or fantasy.

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